

Poland's LGBT-free zones and global anti-gender campaigns

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Świdnik, a town in south-east Poland, has become the country's first 'LGBT-free zone'. In March 2019, the county council declared its aim to protect children and families from 'homosexual propaganda' and moral degeneration. In a non-binding resolution, local politicians pledged to refrain from any action that would encourage 'tolerance of LGBT people'. That included withdrawing financial help for organisations that aim to promote non-discrimination and equality.

Other local governments soon followed suit, with the support of Poland's ruling right-wing, populist Law and Justice party and Catholic priests. On 1 August 2019, the archbishop of Kraków, Marek Jędraszewski, claimed that contemporary Poland was 'no longer affected by the red plague [of communism]' but that [a new, 'rainbow' plague](#) wanted to control people's souls, hearts, and minds. His declaration was applauded by politicians from Law and Justice and by ultra-conservative organisations.

Hate speech or protection of family?

Activists Kuba Gawron, Paulina Pająk, and Paweł Preneta have created the [Atlas of Hate](#), an online tool which lists the places where similar anti-LGBT declarations have been signed. As of March 2020, over eighty Polish municipalities, including four voivodships (provinces), had declared their aim to be free from 'LGBT ideology'. These local authorities have either adopted declarations like Świdnik's or signed the Charter of the Rights of the Family, which endorses similar values and is aggressively promoted by the Ordo Iuris Institute.

The institute, an ultra-conservative think tank established in 2013, is a key organisation in a Polish campaign against 'gender and LGBT ideology'. The institute's main activities include producing the core arguments against LGBT and 'gender ideology' used by the authorities, engaging in strategic litigation, proposing new laws, and harassing progressive NGOs and activists.

Ultra-conservative activists have presented LGBT-free zones as an answer to the signing in March 2019 of the so-called LGBT+ charter by Rafał Trzaskowski, the mayor of Warsaw. The charter includes measures to prevent homophobic violence, such as sex education and anti-discrimination teaching in state schools, based on World Health Organisation guidelines. Law and Justice politicians, ultra-conservative NGOs, and the Catholic clergy have strongly criticised the charter, arguing that sex education leads to 'early sexualisation' of young people and violates parents' right to decide how their children are brought up. The Charter of the Rights of the Family is clearly an attempt to stop local authorities from issuing any measures to help combat homophobia and discrimination against minorities.

After the Atlas of Hate hit the headlines, the Ordo Iuris Institute announced it would help the municipalities listed to sue the activists for defamation. The institute argued that the Charter of the

Rights of the Family—unlike local declarations like the one signed in Świdnik—did not explicitly mention LGBT or homosexuality, and thus did not discriminate against the LGBT community. In an open letter on the institute’s website, its representatives claimed that the Charter simply ‘aims to promote the constitutional principles of protection of family marriage, parenthood, and motherhood’ and protect children ‘against demoralisation’. The institute interprets the Atlas of Hate’s [listing of the municipalities](#) that have signed both the declarations and the Chapter as misinformation and manipulation.

At the same time, the Polish commissioner for human rights challenged the local government declarations in the country’s administrative courts. In December 2019, the European Parliament passed a resolution that strongly condemned the LGBT-free zones in Poland and cases of homophobic violence in other countries and [called for all resolutions](#) that attack sexual minorities to be revoked.

The outcomes of these legal proceedings are yet to be seen. But it is clear that ultra-conservative organisations and the Catholic church aim to continue their campaign against what they see as LGBT ideology by claiming that sex education, anti-discrimination legislation, and equal rights for homosexual people pose a threat to children and the ‘natural family’.

The anti-gender movement and right-wing populism

Politics of exclusion is a weapon of choice of all ethno-nationalist, right-wing populist politicians. [Feminist philosopher and activist Ewa Majewska](#) has noted that the LGBT-free zones are reminiscent of anti-Jewish legislation in Nazi Germany: ‘In the Third Reich it was Jews who were demonised; in contemporary Poland it is the LGBTI+ community. We became a minority deprived of basic rights and human dignity to symbolically strengthen the “nation” and its sovereign, increasingly absolute power.’

Viewed in isolation, the battle over LGBT-free zones could be interpreted as stemming from the deeply ingrained nationalism and homophobia characteristic of post-socialist countries. However, a detailed analysis of the main actors and their discourse shows that the Polish campaign is a part of a wider war on gender: a global trend of opposition to gender equality, human rights, and progressive change. That trend is [present in many countries](#), including France, Germany, Brazil, and the United States. Anti-gender campaigns, initiated by the Vatican in the 1990s, are continued today by both religious authorities and the representatives of ultra-conservative organisations.

In recent years, opposition to feminism and gender have gone mainstream because of growing cooperation between ultra-conservative actors and right-wing populist parties. Right-wing politicians readily adopt ultra-conservative language and scapegoat ‘genderists’ or ‘promoters of LGBT ideology’ to strengthen fear and create a moral division between ordinary people and corrupt elites. So, while Poland’s LGBT-free zones may seem extreme, they form part of a broader trend of exploiting questions of gender in political struggles.

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